

OBITUARIES

Filmmaker Charles Guggenheim Dies at 78

By BART BARNES
Washington Post Staff Writer

Charles Guggenheim, 78, a cinematic storyteller with an eye for poignancy and drama who directed and produced prize-winning documentaries on people and events ranging from the 1889 Johnstown flood to Robert F. Kennedy, died of pancreatic cancer Oct. 9 at Georgetown University Hospital.

Mr. Guggenheim also was among the originators of the made-for-television political campaign commercial. He was instrumental in the development and shaping of this craft in the 1960s and '70s, and helped make it an essential element of late 20th century electioneering.

But his primary passion was the motion picture documentary. In a career that spanned a half-century, he produced and directed more than 100, four of which won Academy Awards. These were "Nine From Little Rock" (1964), about the 1957 school desegregation crisis in Arkansas; "RFK Remembered" (1969), about the life and death of the former attorney gen-



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Charles Guggenheim won Oscars for documentaries such as "Nine From Little Rock" and "RFK Remembered."

eral and New York senator; "The Johnstown Flood" (1989), about the flood that devastated the Pennsylvania town 100 years earlier; and "A Time For Justice" (1994), about the civil rights movement.

He did documentary film biographies of presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, which now are part of the permanent collections in their presidential libraries in Independence, Mo.; Boston; and Austin. Mr. Guggenheim's work included documentaries on the Ku Klux Klan; the restoration of the Statue of Liberty; the experience of immigrants entering the United States through Ellis Island; the landings of Allied troops on the coast of France in the D-Day invasion of World War II; and the construction of the 660-foot Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

In his films, he tried to tell history from the point of view of the individuals who experienced it. "There are great stories in what is very common," he said.

Among documentary filmmakers, said Jack Valenti, president and chief executive of the Motion Picture Association of America, Mr. Guggenheim "is at the very summit, not just here but around the world."

As a producer and creator of political advertisements, Mr. Guggenheim did campaign work for

Adlai E. Stevenson; John, Robert and Edward Kennedy; George McGovern; former Ohio senator Howard Metzenbaum; former Pennsylvania governor Milton Shapp and others.

"We were very early in the business . . . and we felt we had a kind of power," Mr. Guggenheim recalled in 1990. "We were winning races no one thought we could. Those kind of things are rather heady. . . . We got swept along by it. . . . We had great moments. I think like many things, you always stay with something a little longer than you should. The newspapers are calling you up every day, and that makes you stay in too long. I realized I wanted to make movies. The ads aren't movies."

By the early 1980s, Mr. Guggenheim was feeling more and more like a propagandist and was growing sick of politics. He was beginning to "sound like people whom I never wanted to sound like," he said. He wanted out, and he got out. "If you play a piano in a house of ill repute," he often said, "it doesn't make a difference how well you play the piano."

Charles Guggenheim was born in Cincinnati, where his father and grandfather were successful furniture merchants. He was the second of three sons and was dyslexic. Not until he reached fourth grade did he learn how to read. For information about what was

going on in the world, he looked at pictures in Life magazine and listened to what people around him were talking about.

After high school, he attended Colorado State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts for a year, then joined the Army. World War II was raging, and Mr. Guggenheim was assigned to an infantry unit. But in September 1944, he was hospitalized in Indiana with a foot infection while the rest of his division, the 106th Infantry, shipped out for Europe. Three months later, the 106th would suffer heavy casualties in the Battle of the Bulge, and thousands would be captured by the Germans.

From the safety of Indiana, Mr. Guggenheim pondered a question that would long persist in the depths of his psyche: Why was he spared while others in his unit faced death or imprisonment? He never found a satisfactory answer, but for the rest of his life the question would haunt him. He spent his last months working on a film documentary about prisoners of war from his unit who were Jewish or had Jewish-sounding names. These soldiers were separated from the other POWs and sent to a Nazi slave-labor camp in the town of Berga in eastern Germany, where hundreds died of starvation, overwork and beatings. The documentary, "Berga, Soldiers of Another War," is

scheduled for release next year.

While making his final documentary, Mr. Guggenheim was fighting his own struggle for survival. For the last seven months, an aggressive cancer had wracked and wasted his once robust physique. He had always been athletic and a fitness enthusiast. He often rode a bicycle the three miles from his home in Northwest Washington to his office in Georgetown.

Jack Valenti was a frequent tennis partner, and he recalled Mr. Guggenheim's playing a fierce and competitive game until the cancer began taking its toll.

"He was a man's man, but there was a sweet gentleness about him," Valenti said. "Charles was quiet. He never flaunted his gifts or talents. He had a wry sense of humor that was never vitriolic or lacerating. He'd say something and you'd think, 'Damn, that's funny. I wish I'd thought of it.'"

When World War II ended, Mr. Guggenheim went back to college, studying contemporary European history and rhetorical criticism at the University of Iowa. Upon graduating, he wanted to work in radio communications.

He moved to New York and found a job as a gofer at CBS Radio. But these also were the early days of television, and soon Mr. Guggenheim found an opportunity to direct and produce a TV program that featured marionettes.